

Fears for Ice Age ridge with go-ahead to extend quarry

It's a significant geological feature that has stood more or less intact for centuries.

The glacial ridge, known as an esker, on the outskirts of Dornoch, dates back to Ice Age and was formed by a stream flowing in or under a melting sheet of glacial ice.

But now it is feared it could be destroyed by extensive quarrying activities.

Sand and gravel from the ridge have been excavated since 1999 and are in demand by the construction industry.

Councillors this week gave the go-ahead for the operators of Achley Quarry to extend their operations deeper into the ridge over the next 10 years.

They were persuaded by the huge economic importance of the enterprise, which employs 40 workers and last year paid out £1 million in wages.

The decision is bound to cause controversy locally, however, with opposition from Dornoch Community Council and a small number of individuals.

Members of the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross

Planning Applications and Review Committee approved the quarry application, submitted by I McHardy, when they met in Tain on Tuesday.

Measuring around one hectare in total and reaching a height of up to ten metres in places, the grass and whin covered ridge lies to the west of the B9168 Poles Road. Quarry operators have already worked part of the ridge and now intend to dig deeper into its western side.

Planning officer Bob Robertson revealed it was intended to extract around 66 tons of material a day, depending on demand, over the next 10 years. The quarry operators also plan to extend their opening hours, starting at 7.30am rather than 8am.

Mr Robertson stated in a report to this week's meeting: "The new working area would provide increased job security for the existing workforce and also retain an important source of local aggregate for the construction industry."

Planners, who recommended the application be approved, said that reinstatement of parts

of the quarry had already taken place.

But Dornoch Community Council made it clear they opposed Mr McHardy's application. Members felt the area applied for was excessive and the amount of material being taken out of the ridge was larger than originally anticipated.

Another three objectors also wrote to planners outlining their concerns over the destruction of the esker ridge which, they claimed, was visited by geologists and geographers. They were also worried about the visual impact of the quarry, noise, dust clouds and increased traffic levels.

East Sutherland and Edderton's Councillor Jim McGillivray, Embo, disagreed with the community council. He said the quarry employed a full-time workforce of 40 and put £1 million in wages into the local economy.

"That is not an inconsiderable amount of money," said Councillor McGillivray. "This project can be viewed as an important pillar in this business, and that influences me greatly."

Councillor McGillivray said the conditions attached to the planning permission seemed sufficient, if they were adequately enforced.

Councillor Bill Fernie of Wick said: "I support the application, but I do have some concerns. We had a quarry in Caithness which developed into one of the largest holes in the Highlands. It was a case of, out of sight and out of mind. We are now faced with a massive problem of back filling some of this huge hole."

"I would like to know a bit more about the inspection regime. How often does someone visit the site? In Caithness the amount of stuff extracted did not relate to the planning application."

"It does concern me that 10 years might go by before we consider workings at this quarry again."

Councillor Fernie called for planners to visit Achley at least every two years.

Area planning manager Allan Todd told him: "I am quite happy to give you a commitment that we will visit this site annually."